The Cleveland Museum of Art

Press Release

March 13, 1995

LEADING CONTEMPORARY ARTIST TO LECTURE AT THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART
A Conversation with Mark Tansey
6:00 pm, March 22, 1995

Mark Tansey was born in San Jose, California, in 1949, the son of an art historian and an art librarian. After graduating from the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles, he moved to New York, worked for three years as an art handler at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and for another two as a studio assistant to artist Helen Frankenthaler. It should come as no surprise that Tansey's own work has been shaped by a lifelong exposure to art. In *A Conversation with Mark Tansey,* the Cleveland audience has a rare opportunity to hear the artist discuss his engaging, challenging, and witty work. Two of his paintings, *Secret of the Sphinx (Homage to Elihu Vedder)*, from 1984, and *Judgment of Paris II,* from 1987, are on loan to the museum and on view in gallery 240.

Tansey uses familiar conventions of representational narrative painting to explore his ideas about meaning, specifically the verbal and visual meanings of printed words and the power of "meaningful" verbal and visual imagery. He departs from late-20th-century critical trends toward interpreting art in terms of pure formalism or pure conceptualism. His large paintings combine intellectual rigor, wry commentary, and shameless verbal and visual punnery in a monochromatic illustrational style that borrows its aura of objectivity from 19th-century painting and documentary photography. On close examination, his work's deadpan expression proves to be a deliberately transparent mask, used ironically to emphasize the subjectivity of interpretation. Just beneath the thin layers of paint, one often finds scraps of silkscreened or photocopied text taken from popular publications, which the artist uses as textural building blocks for his compositions, exploiting the textual meanings of the printed words. Well-known icons in art, literary, and scientific circles (Jackson Pollock, Roland Barthes, Albert Einstein, Princess Diana, and so on) frequently appear as groups of figures in Tansey's compositions, as he explores intellectual and cultural life in the 20th century. Allusions to familiar literary, historical, religious, and mythological stories abound. Sometimes he lampoons specific targets, but more often he combines incongruous elements to find common threads of meaning or to point out common absurdities. His lecture is free and open to the public.

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